

# A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

## Searching for Roots in the Sierra Estrella

*Strapped in the Cherokee, engine running, oil warming. Sectional folded, GPS loaded. The journey, short in distance, long in time. From Chandler Airpark to Estrella Sailport. Twenty miles will take us back twenty years.*

Power comes up and we start to roll, four wheels turning. Yes four, it's a Jeep not a Piper. We don't have a road map but we'll navigate with our memory. And the sectional. And a constellation of satellites.

I've just delivered TwoWhiskeyMike, my yellow biplane, to a new home in Arizona, a sizable flight from Boston in winter. Today was allocated to checking out the new owner. This morning on downwind, I pointed the nose west for ten minutes too long and we found ourselves over the mountains of the Sierra Estrella.

We flew along the rugged spine, just above the rock, reliving two decades ago. Visiting peaks with wonderful names. Names like Montezuma and Butterfly. Remembering many flights. Smooth and turbulent, high noon and twilight. All, save this one, without engine.

Saguaro, giant cacti clinging to the slopes, hurry past our wing tips. TwoWhiskeyMike's new owner expresses discomfort with the close proximity of his destiny. We head back to the pattern. I vow to return to the ridge. Today!

Finally, the checkout is complete. Like a mother bird, I watch the new owner solo for the first time. TwoWhiskeyMike and I have a date tomorrow at dawn, we'll go to San Diego to complete our coast-to-coast flight. But for the rest of this afternoon I'm off duty. Onward to Estrella!

The trip of twenty miles by air is thirty as the crow drives. The Sierra Estrella erupts from the desert, like the plates on a partially buried stegosaurus, a very large stegosaurus. The range runs north-south some 15 to 20 miles and has peaks about 4,500 feet high. The north end props up the edge of the Phoenix TCA, keeping it from toppling over. The south end of the range has Estrella Sailport at its foot.

Estrella Sailport, where eighteen years earlier a fledgling glider pilot had become a fledgling soaring pilot. Where a wanna-be aerobat had started to realize a dream.

The late afternoon sky is a perfect shade of blue. It's the third of January and I'm in a short-sleeved shirt. Life is good! But anxiety gnaws as I realize that Arizona Soaring, Inc. has no idea I'm coming. What if the schedule is full and I don't get to fly? Cross that bridge when it comes.

The Sierra Estrella is tantalizingly visible to the west, looming larger as we progress along the empty roads. Excitement builds as Maricopa goes by. At last, I arrive.

Walking to the flight line, I see a Twin Astir doing aerobatics. It's not immediately obvious what some of the maneuvers wanted to be. Must be the ubiquitous student, Ham Phisted. Then, lesson over, the Astir does an inverted pass, obviously at the hand of the instructor, Master Full.

I'm in luck, there's room for one more flight. Yes! Introductions done and objectives discussed, we mount up.

Five-point harness tightened to max. Canopy closed and locked. Takeoff checks complete. Ready to launch! Thumbs up to the wingman.

The Twin Astir starts to roll, roped to the accelerating Pawnee. Not exactly a cat shot! Stick full back to lift the nose wheel off. Large aileron deflections are required to keep the wings level. Feet flex the rudder pedals to keep us in line.

As the pace picks up the huge sailplane lifts off, at an impossibly low speed. For a while the tug remains earthbound, trailing the sailplane like some giant raccoon tail on an antenna.

Now we're using control pressures rather than deflections. Light pressure from the feet keeps the sailplane in the groove. Light forward pressure from the hand keeps us from pulling up the tug's tail. Light pressure to either side keeps the wings level. The movement of the controls is barely perceptible, more thought than motion.

Now the tug is airborne. We climb in broad sweeping circles over the desert. The Astir and the Pawnee are one in the sky, as if welded to rails of steel. A voice from the back seat says: "Not bad for a biplane driver who hasn't flown a real airplane in years." I take it as a compliment. For the last few years just about all my time has been Skybolt aerobatics and cross-country, I haven't flown a sailplane for over ten years.

The Twin Astir hisses through the air. I can't decide whether I'm imagining hearing the tug's engine or imagining not hearing it. In any case, things here are a whole lot quieter than in my yellow biplane, TwoWhiskeyMike, sometimes known as Dessa Belle.

Five thousand feet above the desert floor we release and the tow plane drops out of sight. The umbilical cord is cut, now we're on our own.

Some clearing turns and we nose down for a loop. A 4G pitch-up and around we go. Not bad! The Astir's pitch response is pretty decent. And there's no gyroscopic effects from the propeller to worry about. Another loop to prove it wasn't a fluke. It wasn't, both were reasonably round. We're hot, let's try a roll.

Stick hard over. Nothing! Did the ailerons disconnect? No, wait a minute, here we go. The Astir gives new significance to the term 'slow roll'. A footfull of rudder helps overcome adverse yaw. To put this in perspective, the Astir has a lot of wing, fifty-seven feet to be exact. The Skybolt's wings are less than half that, and they have twice as many ailerons to whisk them around.

We pass through inverted losing altitude like crazy. I'm underestimating how much forward stick is required to overcome the lack of a symmetric airfoil. We dish out and end up ninety degrees off heading. No compliments on this one. Another roll to prove it wasn't a fluke. It wasn't, this one also lost altitude and dished out. At least I'm consistent.

I'd like to report that the next roll was perfect, or even adequate, but, malheureusement, that wasn't the case. My feet just plain refuse to behave properly during the last ninety degrees to upright. I write them up for disciplinary action and move on to something else.

Hammerheads in a sailplane don't last long and demand perfect timing. After the pull to vertical the line up is quite short. The rudder doesn't have any prop blast to assist it, wait too long and it's tailslide time, which in the Astir is verboten! I manage the hammerheads without problem, making up somewhat for the ratty rolls.

Sailplane aerobatics are performed in relative quiet. To experience absolute quiet, we enter a hammerhead but bring the nose a few degrees past vertical, holding it there with more and more forward stick as airspeed decreases to zero. The sailplane comes to a dead, dead, stop in the air, and, just before it tips over backwards, we experience absolute quiet. Zero sound. Utter silence.

And so it goes. Loops, rolls, hammerheads. Whifferdills. Nothing exotic, but immensely enjoyable nevertheless. Maybe because it's not work, as is practicing for a competition.

Now it's time to land. I ask the check pilot if I can do a 'contest finish', a euphemism for a high speed, low altitude pass. "Well, okay." The nose goes down and the big sailplane accelerates, quietly but just as surely as if we were burning fuel. Instead of gasoline and air, our energy comes from a mixture of altitude and speed, and we can trade one for the other.

We come arcing around in the dive, leveling out on a downwind leg at a hundred and twenty knots, a dozen feet above the desert, too low to see the runway we're paralleling. Saguaro and Joshua, denizens of the desert, go by in a blur.

We whoosh past where the end of the runway must be and up, up, up we go, into a graceful arching wingover. My god, this is magical! Sinful! Illegal! At the apogee, wing dipped ninety degrees, we're poised like an eagle, surveying our domain. Around we come in the wingover, onto short final, a hair off the centerline, a hair high, a hair fast. Gentle corrections, half spoilers, we touch down and roll out in front of the hangar.

I thank the stranger in the back seat. Especially for trusting me to do the finish. We've not done anything noteworthy to the world at large, but we sure have made my day. I float around a few feet off the ground, in a state of euphoria higher than any peyote could induce.

Sunset's coming soon. I drive my borrowed Jeep into the desert, off the road, leaving a dust trail as solid as airshow smoke. I get out and walk, always wary of the potential for slithering critters. Alone in the desert, savoring today's experience, pressing replay again and again. And thinking back to my first pilgrimage to Estrella.

My love affair with sailplanes began at Hawkesbury, Ontario, in 1977, late in the year, after most of the thermals had gone south. Of fifty flights logged before snow shut down the field, only four or five encountered thermals. This was gliding, not soaring. Perhaps as an offset, my log evidences much aerobatic activity. Wingovers, loops, spins. Basic aerobatics, all self-taught.

What I needed was expanding, filling out. So early in 1978, while Hawkesbury was hibernating, I detoured from a California business trip. Estrella had everything I wanted, soaring of every imaginable sort - thermal, ridge, wave. Plus aerobatics, real aerobatics, with rolls and inverted flight.

My mentor was Lazlo Horvath, who asked no quarter and gave no quarter. He demanded perfection, asking no less from me than what he required of himself. You had to be Worthy to solo his airplanes. He had enough skill,

and ego, to let me expand the envelope of my competence. His philosophy: after the right training the mission should be a piece of cake. And so it was.

We worked towards my B.S. - Bachelor of Soaring. Cranked into sixty degree banks, climbing in tightly-wound desert thermals, armpits protesting the turbulence. Or scraping the ridge to extract every bit of energy from the breeze. And when really lucky, catching a wave for a smooth elevator ride up.

After each class, there were multiple assignments - going up alone to practice and perfect. On Day Four, my log shows a two hour flight, in a Schweizer 2-32, which encountered just about everything: "10 Knots Down! Rotor! Wave! Ridge! Thermal!"

An entry from Day Five shows a flight of twenty-six minutes in a Schweizer 1-34: "No Altitude Gain. Ridge not working. No thermals. No nothing." That was to be my Five Hour Silver Badge - hope springs eternal!

When there was no air moving in an upward direction, we worked on my B.A. - Bachelor of Aerobatics. The main goal was to learn rolls and inverted flight, two areas where rookies quickly become disoriented. Not just how to do things right, but more importantly, what to do when things go wrong.

Glider aerobatics occupy a very special place in my soul. After all, Magee wrote: "Sunward I've climbed ... and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung, high in the sunlit silence."

And Jonathan Livingston Seagull didn't have a whirling beak. On a practical level, competing in Advanced in a Skybolt, I've been well served by the energy management lessons learned here. But in the midst of all this learning and sweat, there was joy and beauty. And humor.

Like the first half roll to inverted, after a rare desert rain. Water, hidden deep in the fuselage, obeys Newton and flows directly to the bubble canopy of the 2-32. Where it sloshes muddily around, inches from our heads, waiting.

We hang suspended in the straps, leafing through the Emergency Procedures section of the Flight Manual. What about landing upside-down? What about "Eject! Eject! Eject!"? We do the inevitable half roll to upright, and prove we are indeed wet behind the ears!

Yes, here I have roots. Soaring roots. Aerobatic roots. Deep roots. Here in the desert is where much of what I value began in earnest. As the sun goes to sleep, I teleport back to another sunset, years ago.

The sky is a deep orange, the desert and mountains a bottomless black. A pure white sailplane passes below, in the opposite direction, going home for the night, a long-winged sculpture the caliber of a Michelangelo. There is no sound. Now alone in the sky, we cruise the

ridge. We could stay here 'til morning, if the wind holds up. Alas, sensibility prevails.

The sailplane containing my body finally slips back to the dark earth. My spirit remains on the ridge, to spend the night with Montezuma and Butterfly. To dream a hundred things.